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## Lesbians in the church: experience and response

At the core of MCC's mission is a commitment to demonstrate God's love among people who suffer from poverty, conflict, oppression and natural disaster. MCC strives to promote peace, justice and dignity for all people. To carry out this commitment MCC emphasizes listening to each other and learning from each other—both at home and around the world.

MCC often finds itself in the midst of struggle, among people who are in serious and sometimes violent disagreement with each other. In those situations our ministry of peace and justice calls us to create safe spaces for people to dialogue with each other. It is dialogue that seeks to promote understanding.

Over the years MCC Women's Concerns has tried to promote understanding among women. It has tried to hear the voices of the disenfranchised, people who are oppressed, excluded, who are generally not heard. Women's Concerns has tried to find ways for people who are not in agreement to be in relationship with each other. It has tried to find ways to help people who are divided on important matters to understand each other better.

Right now the church is seriously divided over issues related to homosexuality. Some Mennonite denominational statements have committed our churches to dialogue on this issue. One statement asked that "we bear the burden of remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ." What does "remaining in loving dialogue with each other in the body of Christ" mean? Just as we are struggling to follow Christ in other areas of our lives we are struggling in the area of remaining in loving dialogue with each other.

With this in mind, MCC Women's Concerns feels that the time has come to allow some of that dialogue to take place in the *Report*. By printing the following stories we hope to give voice to various perspectives among Mennonite women on the issue of homosexuality.

The stories have been chosen to reflect very diverse experiences and perspectives.

Lois Kenagy tells her story as mother of a lesbian. Jewel Showalter shares her perspective of a heterosexual woman who believes that homosexual practice is sin and that dialogue should not lead to a new church position on human sexuality. Stan and Marlene Smucker write as pastors of a church that is openly welcoming of gay and lesbian members. Sharon Heath writes as a woman in a monogamous committed lesbian relationship who celebrates her sexuality as a gift from God. Martha Pepper shares her experience of moving from fear to boldly counseling lesbian women who want to change their sexual orientation. Ardelle Brown shares her story as a bisexual woman who is making connections between spirituality and sexuality. Donella Clemens writes as a woman in church leadership who has bracketed her personal convictions on sexuality issues as she has implemented the official church position.

We realize providing a forum for these diverse stories is risky for MCC. There are those who may read one story and then say "MCC thinks this way about homosexuality." We hope you won't do that. We hope you will read all the stories and as a result get a more complete understanding of the many experiences of women in the Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches. We hope that you will reflect on your own experience and be able to find places to share your own story. We hope that you will find your story or your own experience reflected in some of these stories.

And so with great humility we offer these stories. May you experience God's grace and love as together we try to find ways to be faithful to our God.

—Lynette Youndt Meck, compiler

**Lynette lives in Akron, Pa. She's been married to Jerry—her high school sweetheart and best friend—for 32 years. Lynette and Jerry are the parents of two adult children. Lynette is a member of the Akron Mennonite Church and has just completed 15 fulfilling years of work with MCC—the last nine as executive director of MCC U.S. She enjoys reading, playing tennis, walking and being with friends.**

**"I have a choice about whether or not to be a Christian; but I don't have any choice about being gay."**

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by Lois Kenagy

## **"... And know I will love you still"**

I can still see the spot on the porch at our house along the river where Susan told me that one reason she was leaving home for graduate school was to get some distance from the local lesbian community. Distance would help her gain perspective and clarity, she felt. My reaction was neither anger nor tears. Only numbness. And fear—fear that if she were lesbian I would be blamed. What would people, particularly Mennonites, think of her and of me?

I assured her that when she had clarity and knew which direction she needed to go, I would support her regardless of which path it would be. I regret that I did not indicate my willingness to walk with her as she was pursuing the journey to self-understanding. She encouraged me to share this information with my women's prayer group, or to talk to the mother of two young Quaker lesbians. But I was not ready to speak to anyone until she knew for sure. To do so felt like putting a label on her when it may not be the right label.

This subject was not completely unfamiliar to me. In previous years two women from our prayer group, at different times, had shared their pain when a gay son and a lesbian daughter had come out to them. Our children had gay friends. Several years earlier during a visit in the Goshen area my nephew who was a college student invited me to hear a guest speaker from Chicago who had been invited to speak on campus about homosexuality. Willard Kraybill, campus doctor and professor for health and sexuality classes, had invited this gay man to talk about his personal experience. I shall never forget his bottom line: "I have a choice about whether or not to be a Christian; but I don't have any choice about being gay." When the reality of homosexuality later came home to me personally, I often remembered his story.

When my daughter raised the possibility she may be gay, I still knew very little. How helpful it would have been to have had access to a book such as *Is It a Choice?*, by Eric

Marcus. But I was too cautious to check it out at the library. I wish I could have been able to say to her, like Fred Small sings to his children in the "Everything Possible" song, "... you can love whomever you will. . . and know I will love you still."

I also regret my comment to her that I would not tell her father, that she would have to tell him. "It would kill him," I unthinkingly said. Obviously this meant that (1) it is a terrible thing to be gay, and (2) her father could not handle that. How wrong were those two assumptions! It is certainly not a terrible thing to have a gay child or to be gay. And after going through some difficult months and years of adjustment to the idea, Clif not only handles the subject of homosexuality with grace, but has come to see how wrong it is for anyone to be prejudiced against gay people. He is a powerful advocate. In those difficult





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months and years ahead I deprived myself of the support I could have had from him.

About five months later Susan and I traveled together from Pennsylvania to Oregon in her pickup. How desperately I wanted to talk about the subject! But I didn't know how, and neither of us said a word about it during those long days of driving.

Even though we were living in the same community and saw each other rather frequently, the subject came up only obliquely, if at all. She began attending a Congregational (UCC) church instead of our local Mennonite church. She dated a few men, but those relationships never seemed to have much meaning for her.

My husband and I often attended church conferences, and sometimes attended seminars put on by the listening Committee on Homosexual Concerns. We became aware of the Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns and subscribed to their newsletter, even though I was sensitive that someone might see the mail and make assumptions.

Our son Eric, 8 years younger than Susan, died in a bicycle/car accident in 1986. The untimely death of a family member is such a powerful experience that one is forced to examine basic realities in a new way. Susan came to terms with her own reality; that she really is lesbian. She learned to know a young woman who was a good friend of her sister-in-law, and that developed into a permanent relationship. In 1991 they held a commitment ("marriage") service in a Congregational church on Long Island. All our immediate family attended, as well as most of her uncles, aunts, and cousins on my side of the family. Clif read a passage of scripture, and I led some a cappella congregational singing.

It had been a long journey but both of us were very much at peace, knowing that Susan was being true to herself and to the God who made her. In spite of the commitment service, for many reasons they were still "in the closet," and we needed to be very careful about our own communications.

In July 1993, Susan wrote us a letter, telling us she was pregnant by alternative conception. I took a deep breath (or two or three). Again, my fear was a selfish one; what would other people think of me, but also, what would

they think of Susan? I didn't want anyone to assume she was promiscuous because she was having a child out of wedlock.

In September, during a visit home, she wrote a lengthy letter to her father's relatives, telling them of her spiritual struggle and journey with her sexual orientation. I was deeply touched by her letter and asked if we could share it with the people at Albany Mennonite, who had known her since early childhood. It may have been better had we shared it a little less broadly.

Members at Albany Mennonite received a copy of her letter at their homes. Susan lived in New York and was not asking for anything from the church except some understanding. But it was too much. The minister and the senior elder visited us a few days later to "silence" both of us. For the time being I would not be permitted to lead music, and both of us were to refrain from any comments during the regular sharing time. Later we met with the full board of elders and experienced what felt to me like terrible verbal abuse.

I had always been active in working for peace and justice issues. Our decision to share Susan's story must have felt to them like I was pushing one more justice issue—and they refused to put up with that.

Some weeks later after informing the pastor privately, I read a letter to the church during sharing time stating that "my ministry in this congregation was completed" and that I would be attending Salem Mennonite Church. It was a painful time, but in the intervening four years there has also been healing. Clif continues as a member at Albany Mennonite but attends Salem with me about half the time.

Since the pregnancy in 1993, Susan and Biene are definitely out of the closet, and Clif and I are therefore free to be out of the closet as well. As we have learned to know many gay persons and many parents of gays, we have had increasing concern about the way they have been treated not only by our homophobic society, but particularly by the church. I know that they are loved by God, and that for most of them it is not a choice. I know

this is the way Susan was created, and that is the case for most other gay persons. (I recognize there are bisexual persons, who may have the option of functioning in either gay or homosexual relationships.)

My son keeps asking me how I can continue to be a Mennonite when the Mennonite Church will not accept my daughter. Clif and I are Mennonites because this is our faith home, and we believe that as members of the church we can work to create greater understanding and acceptance of these wonderful persons whom God created in a special way and who are trying to live lives of honesty and integrity. How much the church loses when it does not accept their beautiful and talented gay children! I believe God is pained by the rejection they experience at the hands of other Christians.

Susan, Biene, and their two daughters bring much love and joy to our lives. They are excellent parents, and we are very proud of them. Both are active in Congregation United Church of Christ, where they hold leadership positions. I pray that their children will be safe in the schools they will attend, and safe in a society that can be very cruel. I will continue to work for the respect and acceptance of all persons included in the diversity of the human race, particularly those of a minority sexual orientation.

**Lois lives on a farm near Albany, Ore. She is an active member of Salem Mennonite Church. She has parented four children, Eric (deceased at age 19), Susan, Marguerite and Peter. She has six grandchildren, ages 1–11. Lois and her husband Clif are in a farm partnership with Peter and his wife. She is a long term peace activist and mediator, currently working with the local Victim Offender Reconciliation Program and the seven-member Oregon Dispute Resolution Commission. She is active in the local PFLAG chapter (parents, family and friends of lesbians and gays).**



by Martha L. Pepper

## My experience counseling lesbian women

I was scared. I was attending my first support group meeting with the Day Seven Ministries. These people were homosexual, and I didn't know what to expect. Would they look and act strange? Did I need to keep my distance from them? Would I somehow be infected with sinful and sexual urges by being close to them? These questions frightened me.

I had responded to a request on our prayer chain for a woman to work with the woman's support group of the Day Seven Ministries. As I brought this request to the Lord, He clearly indicated that I should offer myself to this task. I had counseled a few lesbian women in the past and was eager to see God set others free from this sinful lifestyle. But I had no training for this work.

I was so glad "Shirley" was leading the group and I was simply supporting her. Shirley had been in a lesbian relationship for 10 years, had cried out to the Lord, and He had delivered her. Following that she was married and raised a family. Her experience gave her a real heart for the women we worked with.

During the next four years Shirley and I led a support group for lesbian women who desired to change. Then Shirley was unable to continue as the leader, and the leadership of the group fell on me. By that time I had moved beyond fear to a deep love for these women.

Day Seven Ministries is a local ministry of Exodus, International, reaching out to men and women struggling with sexual temptations. We believe that God created humankind as male and female, that our sexuality is a good gift from God, but that sexual intercourse should occur only in a heterosexual relationship between husband and wife united in marriage.

We also believe that the church, the body of Christ, is made up of people who have been redeemed from many sinful lifestyles. 1 Corinthians 6:9–12 gives a list of sinful habits including homosexuality. But it goes on to say,

**"At the beginning of this work I expected God to do an instant transformation. But I have learned that God's work takes time."**

**"Even though I began this ministry with fear and uncertainty, God has been faithful in teaching me and using me."**

"That is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God." There were homosexuals whose lives had been changed in the early church. This gives hope for anyone struggling with this problem at the present time.

Working with lesbian women has been a growing experience for me. My interest in these women began more than 25 years ago when I lived in the Bronx, New York. In doing street evangelism, we met two lesbian lovers who were asking for spiritual help. We met with them several times for Bible study but then lost track of them. These two women opened my eyes to a very needy group of people.

My next experience was with a young woman, "Angie," who was a new Christian. She had experienced a dramatic change when she accepted the Lord and wanted to follow Him in obedience. She was ready and willing to give up her lesbian relationship. But her whole manner of dressing, walking and relating to people was lesbian.

I worked with Angie briefly but was not able to help her make the necessary changes to completely leave the lifestyle. Yet she was growing in the Lord. Several years went by in which I had only telephone contact with her. I was surprised the next time I saw her because she looked like a different person. Gone were the hard lines in her face and the boyish hair style. In its place was a beautiful winning smile accompanied by lovely flowing hair. She was dressed and related as a young woman. She told me that an older woman had helped her work through her anger and change her appearance. She said it was not easy, but God had been faithful during the process.

One of the difficult things for me to learn was that this kind of change takes time. At the beginning of this work I expected God to do an instant transformation. But I have learned that God's work takes time. Since much of the personality and way of thinking is controlled by the lifestyle, God deals gently as He brings change. With Angie it took 10 years from the time she accepted the Lord until she fully accepted herself as a woman.

During the last six years we have worked with women at various places in the lesbian walk. Some have had problems in their thought life but never acted on them. Others have been in the lifestyle from the time they were

teenagers. Some have been married and considered themselves bisexual. Others could never see themselves with a man. Yet our support group provides a safe place to deal with any of the issues relating to this problem.

I am learning that there are many issues relating to the lesbian problem. Although we talk about handling sexual temptations, we also deal with the need to establish wholesome relationships with parents, other women and men. "Barb" came to us two years ago after a life of disappointment in relationships with men and women. Three years earlier she had proclaimed that she was lesbian. But when that way of life disappointed her, she turned to God. After accepting Jesus as her Savior she knew she had to leave her lesbian lifestyle. That's when she found about our ministry and became part of the support group.

Barb moved forward in her relationship with the Lord, learning to enjoy times at home alone as she developed habits of Bible study and prayer. She also became active with church activities and singles groups. In the support group she was able to talk about her strained relationship with her mother, hurts from her teen years, her marriage which ended in divorce, and then her full endorsement of herself as a lesbian. She has been able to see all the confusion of the past as an attempt to live life without God. In yielding to Him she is finding her true identity as a woman created in His image to bring glory to His name. She is looking forward to marriage and family someday.

Even though I began this ministry with fear and uncertainty, God has been faithful in teaching me and using me. I have learned that these women are seeking love, and as they come to know the love of God through Jesus Christ and forgive those who have wronged them they can begin to develop wholesome relationships with others. In that sense they are no different from any of us. We all need God to meet the inner needs of our heart for love. God keeps me focused on simply being a channel through which His love can flow.

**Martha lives in Elizabethtown, Pa. with her husband Dr. Rollin Pepper. They are members of the Elizabethtown Brethren in Christ Church where they serve as deacons. She works as a professional counselor doing marital and individual counseling. She enjoys reading, gardening, traveling and playing games with their grandchildren.**

by Sharon Heath

## Like a sunflower toward the sun

It is 1998, and I am now 44 years old. I was raised as a Conservative Baptist, and asked Jesus into my heart when I was 6 years old. I was baptized at age 9, and I took my commitment as a Christian very seriously even at that young age. I remember going “witnessing” during high school, using The Four Spiritual Laws to try to win souls. Because of my conservative Christian beginnings, coming out as a lesbian was a long and difficult process. This is my story.

It is 1966. I am 12 years old and in seventh grade. I am lying in bed, thinking about the fact that all my girlfriends seem to want to spend time with the boys, and I want to spend time with my girlfriends. I realize that this is odd. I know the words “lesbian” and “homosexual.” I wonder if I could possibly be one. I know better, somehow, than to discuss this question with anyone.

It is 1975, and I will be graduating from college this year. Through high school and college I have clung, as if to a life ring, to the knowledge that adolescents often have same-sex crushes. But I’m 21 years old and my crushes continue. I have become skilled at keeping within myself my feelings for my girlfriends as well as the deep spiritual turmoil in my soul. Over the past four years I have considered talking to a counselor at the Counseling Center about whether I could possibly be a lesbian. But I attend a conservative Christian college, and I am afraid the counselor will not keep my disclosure confidential and I will be expelled if anyone knows I am gay. So I continue to live with the question: I wonder if I’m a lesbian.

It is 1978. My best friend and roommate is getting married. My neck, which is where I carry the feelings I cannot acknowledge, freezes up and I cannot move my head. I go to a chiropractor. He gives me a neck brace and tells me that I should find a nice young man to take care of me. I am furious, but I don’t tell him that I don’t



“I am lying in bed, thinking about the fact that all my girlfriends seem to want to spend time with the boys, and I want to spend time with my girlfriends.”

want a man to take care of me. I also do not tell anyone, including myself, that I am in love with my best friend and that is the reason my neck has frozen up. Somehow I manage to sew my bridesmaid’s dress anyway. I am an emotional mess, but there is no one to turn to for advice or comfort. I am alone.

It is 1980. I am in Mennonite Voluntary Service and have become a Mennonite. I am in love with “Matthew,” a man in my service unit; he thinks I am a lesbian, and we often talk about it. I tell him that I think I might be a lesbian but I don’t know. We fall in love anyway.

It is 1985. I am 31 years old, a lawyer and living in San Francisco with Matthew, whom I have married. He is a conscientious objector, and we have started our own Voluntary Service unit as a way of living simply and avoiding paying war taxes. But we have serious communication problems, and I am beginning to question whether we can keep our relationship alive. I beg Matthew to go to counseling with me but he refuses, saying our relationship is just fine with him. I go to counseling, alone.

I am struggling to answer the question, Am I a lesbian? I spend hours walking the hills of San Francisco, my brain and heart on fire with the question. I am obsessed with finding my truth, with facing myself, and I begin keeping a journal.

I finally recognize within myself, within the patterns of my relationships over the past 19 years, my deep orientation toward women and lack of orientation toward men. I realize that, like a sunflower toward the sun, I have sought out females for my primary relationships, as my guiding stars, as the orienting points on my internal compass. Even though my feelings for women have often not been explicitly sexual, I am a lesbian nonetheless. With great relief, and dread, I say the words out loud: I guess I *am* a lesbian.

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**"I would no sooner hide the fact that we are a welcoming and accepting church than I would hide that we are a Christian church."**

It has taken me 19 years to come out to myself, and I tell no one else. I must live with this newly recognized self for a while before I know what to do with it. I am still committed to my marriage, and I want to stay married if we can work out our communication difficulties. However, Matthew is withdrawing more and more. In the Spring of 1985, when he finally asks me again if I am a lesbian, I tell him yes. Two months later he goes home to take care of his father, who is dying. When he comes home, he tells me he wants a divorce.

The next 12 years fly by. I fall in love with a woman. We are together for five years, but eventually this relationship, too, ends. I come out, slowly—first to my church community, then gradually to friends and colleagues, finally to my family. I begin a new relationship with Lisa. This time I go slower, take time to heal, take time to be alone, take time to get to know her. We learn how to talk with each other about our differences, and how to fight, fairly and cleanly. We fall in love, buy a house together, think about starting a family. Lisa tries for three years to get pregnant. After her second miscarriage she is distraught, and we must decide whether to try in vitro fertilization or to adopt a baby.

It is August, 1997. Lisa and I are on a plane, heading home, our newly adopted daughter asleep in our arms. Our parents and friends wait for us at the airport in San Francisco. One journey is ending, and a whole new adventure awaits.

**Sharon is the Vice President of the Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (BMC) and a member of First Mennonite Church of San Francisco, a Supportive Congregation. Sharon is a family law attorney, working primarily with low-income families with child custody and visitation problems. Sharon's partner, Lisa, is a public defender in San Francisco.**



**by Marlene and Stan Smucker**

## **Sharing a safe place of hospitality and belonging**

Pastoring a congregation that is openly welcoming to gay, lesbian and bisexual people has been only positive for us, and we feel willing to let others know what Arvada Mennonite Church (AMC) is doing as an inclusive and welcoming congregation. In 1985, before we were a part of this church, AMC had an extensive study of the issues of homosexuality with speakers from many different fields and viewpoints. In the discussion that followed one of the older members of the congregation said, "I would no sooner hide the fact that we are a welcoming and accepting church than I would hide that we are a Christian church."

For all the years of our ministry, we have had the personal commitment to inclusiveness of all people, based on the simple belief that God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus to offer loving redemption and salvation to "everyone who believes," and that God makes no distinctions, whether "Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female." Jesus is our supreme example of inclusiveness, and we find real consolation in trusting the way of Jesus as shown us in the Gospels as we go along.

Our first experiences of this inclusiveness were in working in African-American communities in several states where we face the realities of white privilege and racial discrimination. We continue to face those realities among some Christians today, and these help us to remember the special care God has for all hurting people, including us.

It was not a stretch to think of a ministry among people who are born gay, lesbian or bisexual as another way of sharing the love and grace of God with others just as it has been shared with us who are white and heterosexual. It is our belief that sexual orientation is not a choice. If people are born gay or lesbian, whether they are silent or acknowledge it publicly, they experience a level of discrimination comparable in some ways to people of color. In dealing with issues such as sexual orientation,

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race, divorce, we have found that personally learning to know and respect people takes away our fears and phobias. Love is the central theme of Christ's message.

Getting to know and love and work with people who are different from us is enriching in many ways. Not that working with people is without problems and struggles. In many cases, people who have been discriminated against have a special sensitivity to emotional pain and to the needs of others. Some real learnings come from listening and walking alongside such people. It could be seen as a ministry of sharing a safe place of hospitality and belonging.

At AMC, *all* are invited to participate fully in the life of the congregation according to the gifts and interests they bring. The bigger struggles are to find people in an urban setting with time and energy to work in the congregation, in addition to their jobs and home and family life.

We have an annual "Welcoming Sunday" in which inclusion and acceptance are the themes of the service. AMC joined the Supporting Congregations Network, and the SCN welcome statement is posted in the front lobby of the church so people attending and participating can see what our commitment is. Some visitors do not return. Others do return because of that commitment.

One could ask whether we are being genuinely inclusive if we take a position which appears to exclude those who do not agree with us. I guess we take that risk by choosing to be open. We believe that is God's call for us at Arvada. There seem to be so many churches who are open to people who are heterosexual and are not open to gays and lesbians. We believe there must be churches which are open to people who are excluded in some.

Regarding making sexual orientation a primary issue in the life and mission of a congregation: We believe that the mission of AMC is not a sexual orientation mission, but a mission of sharing Christ's Gospel in an increasingly alienating society in a postmodern and post-Christian age. To be inclusive regardless of sexual orientation is just one expression of this Gospel commitment. To affirm in the fellowship people who are Hmong refugees sharing our building is another expression of that same commitment. To be inclusive of people recovering from alcohol or drug

addiction may be another expression. Accepting people regardless of wealth, educational status or age, or accepting those recovering from sexual abuse or divorce may be other ways of acting on the love God had extended to each of us.

Some may ask how we deal with the question of gay or lesbian people who are living in a committed relationship with another person of the same sex. Our position statement, which was studied and reaffirmed again recently, does not address that question. We begin with the questions of commitment to faith in God as known in Christ and to the Church as we know it as Mennonite. We honor lives of integrity and faithfulness in *all* relationships. We feel promiscuity is sinful and destructive. We trust that all couples will choose to love in a faithful commitment to one another believing God honors this.

For the two of us, there have been some moments of anxiety and uncertainty growing out of the expressed feelings of those who disagree with us. But we are often affirmed and continue to believe that this is an important part of our mission as a congregation. We also believe that it is important for us to help build a middle ground of exploration and discussion among Anabaptists who disagree. And in reality, we believe there are many congregations who are looking at issues of being welcoming but are fearful of risking criticism or sanction. We know that those who disagree and are troubled with homophobia will probably not change. We will show respect and consideration toward those who disagree with us or those who are still in process of understanding Christ's invitation of "come unto me, all ye . . ." To learn to agree and disagree "in love," as we have been guided to do, is an important part of this call.

**Marlene and Stan live in Arvada and have been co-pastors of Arvada Mennonite Church for nine years. They have three married sons and six pre-school grandchildren. Marlene also works part-time as a nurse. Stan has been a pastor for 38 years. The years at Arvada are their first co-pastoring experience. They both enjoy riding motorcycle, camping and reading. Marlene likes to garden, and Stan likes to walk.**

"In those situations of temptation and struggle we walked with people, 'wrestling in prayer,' pointing to Jesus, and looking reverently to God's word for direction."



by Jewel Showalter

## Fruit Juice Anyone?

My first encounter with the word "homosexual" was in the Scriptures. I began reading the Bible at a very early age and have continued throughout my life. Sometime in my late teens I purposed to read the Bible through at least once a year—and have maintained that discipline. Homosexual practice, along with other types of impurity, was something from which I, as a follower of Jesus, purposed to "flee."

I first encountered homosexual persons as part of an urban "plunge" experience while my husband and I were living in Chicago (1968–70). We attended the meeting of a gay group who wanted to dialogue with seminary students. I never developed any friendships out of that interchange, but became more knowledgeable about factors contributing to homosexual behavior. As part of the urban experience I also met persons involved in substance abuse. One of our closest friends was a man who was deeply involved in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Later, while doing church planting in Ohio and in the Middle East I was involved in friendships and conversations with persons in the church and community who struggled with overwhelming temptations in their lives—both heterosexual and homosexual temptation, substance abuse, and other life-controlling problems. In those situations of temptation and struggle we walked with people, "wrestling in prayer," pointing to Jesus, and looking reverently to God's word for direction.

Thus when I was asked to write an article for *Women's Concerns Report* as part of a forum in which I would be one heterosexual woman who felt that homosexuality is sin among other voices who would argue for its normalcy, I initially turned down the invitation.

I was deeply uneasy with the proposed forum because the invitation seemed to carry the presumption that I would now be participating in an Anabaptist hermeneutical circle which was somehow pointing toward and even representing a new position on the subject of homosexuality. That is, the nature of the invitation in itself seemed

to assume that the new voice for Anabaptism on the subject is many-faceted, that the traditional Anabaptist-Christian position which we espouse, for example, in Lancaster Conference (and in other circles of fellowship to which I've belonged), is only one aspect of a new "truth" which is emerging from dialogue within the community of faith.

I am open to dialogue, but closed to a postmodern promotion of inclusivity as a new Anabaptist principle. In other words, if this is simply a forum for dialogue, I'm open. But if this stands as a circle of communal discernment, I'm very hesitant to add my voice to such a community.

For a group of people to say they are followers of Christ and simultaneously to seek or promote a new position which has not been part of Christian affirmation in any culture or period of history feels like revisiting the Garden—"Did God really say . . . ?"

As I stated earlier, I belong to a group of Christians who as a community believe that the Scriptures teach that homosexual behavior is sin. And the definition of sin doesn't change if the sinner happens to be one's brother, sister, son or daughter.

Maybe this word picture can communicate why I am reacting to *Women's Concerns Report* as an organ of an Anabaptist-Mennonite organization planning such an issue.

Let's suppose that pineapple juice, orange juice, cider, grapefruit juice, and mango juice all decide to have a "fruit juice forum." They talk about how juice can be frozen or canned, fresh-squeezed or made from concentrate. But they are all pure juices, just different kinds, no artificial flavors or sugars. It's a very different sort of thing than a "cold drinks forum" where all the colas and uncolas, the fruit punches and iced teas can represent their wares along with the pure fruit juice.

I'd feel more comfortable as "cider" in a "cold drinks forum" that recognizes itself as a "cold drinks forum." I could be wrong, but it seems to me that this forum purports to be a "fruit juice forum" (a discussion among people holding the traditional Anabaptist-Christian position) but is trying to sneak in some artificial sugars and flavors (those who seek a new position) because . . . the fruit juices are too sour!

**"If indeed, a new sort of postmodern 'Anabaptism' moves to include different kinds of sexual impurity in the community of faith, a new renewal movement by another name will rise to once again call the church back to faith and purity."**

**"We talked about what it would be like to move away from our homes. We talked about what freedom would look like. Both of us lived in homes where nothing about us was respected, not our feelings, not our ideas and not our bodies."**

I have no problem with a Muslim, a Christian, and a Buddhist sitting down together and sharing their views on Jesus. It's clear where everyone is coming from. Not everyone is a follower of Jesus and under his lordship. But in a forum such as *Women's Concerns Report* the issues can quickly become fuzzy. The lines between what has historically been understood as orthodoxy and unorthodoxy become blurred.

Of course culture is dynamic. Critical discipleship issues vary from place to place and time to time. But the core Christian beliefs on human sexuality have not changed for almost 2,000 years.

Is my voice for the historic Anabaptist-Christian position now a minority voice in MCC's Women's Concerns Report? It seems only two of the seven articles clearly speak from that perspective. And MCC's position is less than clear and strong.

Someone has to be a "gatekeeper" for the church. I don't think MCC's mandate is one of "gatekeeper," but neither is it "gate destroyer." Gates can isolate and divide. They can also protect and shelter.

So should I participate in this forum to somehow shore up the historic Anabaptist-Christian position on human sexuality against the onslaughts of postmodern inclusivity? I rather think this position has always been and always will be under attack. Recurring renewal movements keep calling the church back to Jesus and simple obedience to his word. If indeed, a new sort of postmodern "Anabaptism" moves to include different kinds of sexual impurity in the community of faith, a new renewal movement by another name will rise to once again call the church back to faith and purity.

Fruit juice anyone? No additives!

**Jewel works for the Communications Department of Eastern Mennonite Missions, writing, editing and speaking. She teaches for the EMM Discipleship Training Centers, for Women and Preschool groups. She is married to Richard Showalter and has three children, Chad, Rhoda and Matthew. Jewel and Richard live in Landisville, Pa. and are members of University Christian Fellowship. They served with Rosedale Mennonite Missions in Kenya, Turkey and Cyprus from 1982 to 1989. Jewel enjoys walking, reading and gardening.**

  
by Ardelle Brown

## Loving the inner spirit

From the age of 10, it became clear to me that I had crushes on both girls and boys. A girl in my elementary school class and I did everything together. We performed music for school assemblies and sang a lot together. We played football with boys in her backyard. We talked about what it would be like to move away from our homes. We talked about what freedom would look like. Both of us lived in homes where nothing about us was respected, not our feelings, not our ideas and not our bodies. We were punished for being normal children, for being too tired and needing sleep, and being too hungry and needing food. Punishments were violent and humiliating, and they included Bible readings. We had dreams of being free from punishment. Although she and I explored sexuality during weekend sleep-overs, she just thought we were "best friends." We drifted apart. She wanted to have a boyfriend, and I didn't share her enthusiasm. I felt abandoned, and yet I wanted her to be happy.

Then I met a boy from another city during the summer. I had sexual feelings for him. We tried to write and visit but for 12-year-olds the distance was too great.

Even at that age, I learned that loving someone is about loving their inner spirit, regardless of whether someone is a boy or a girl.

In my teenage years I had no healthy boundaries. I had many sexual experiences with no intimacy or warmth. My childhood had taught me: Be passive, polite and smiling. Be violated and used sexually, but *be quiet*. Don't have emotions or don't show emotion to others because it makes adults uncomfortable. Don't express thoughts because adults are always right and will find a way to make you wrong. Don't set boundaries and limits because adults have all the power and control over the child.

When I was 19, I finally began learning to assert limits and to state my needs effectively.

**"Christ is the only one who supplies inner peace, love and greater compassionate understanding of others."**

**"The freedom I have recently found is better than anything I ever expected. As a child I talked with my friend about one day being free. I have been blessed way beyond my wildest dreams."**

Church and religion did not help me accept or understand myself. I felt a lot of fear that if people in church found out my true nature as a child, and later as an adult, I would be unwelcome and hated. I was afraid they would force me to be "healed from my sickness" or "confess my sinning to be forgiven." I felt I was supposed to be ashamed of something I believed was sacred. I knew that could not be Christ's way. So I kept Christ and left the church behind. I took the essence of Christ's teachings of love, compassion and acceptance of those who are oppressed. Christ became my elder brother who could guide, love and protect me on my healing journey.

As long as I depend on only Him for what I need, I am healthy. Christ is my inner teacher. He leads me to those experiences and people that I can learn the most from. When I start to develop unhealthy dependence on any one person, or a 12-step group, or a church, preacher or teacher, then I get sick, emotionally and sometimes physically. Christ is the only one who supplies inner peace, love and greater compassionate understanding of others. In the fellowship I am now part of, I can celebrate all aspects of myself and others who surround me. I am free to love.

When I told my mother that I was bisexual, she confided in me that she was bisexual too. She was filled with shame and self-hatred. She kept herself isolated from everyone until she died by suicide in March 1997. I had hoped she could make peace with herself.

Today I protect the part of me that is still a child. I have respect and compassion for myself

because I survived so much pain and neglect. I am learning to re-parent my child self, giving love and words of empowerment. I also find supportive, safe, loving people to help meet those needs and to help me learn about fun, trust and playfulness.

I am learning to be a healthy, imperfect, growing parent for my son. I believe I have succeeded in breaking the multigenerational cycle of abuse, neglect and addiction. I have been celibate since I had my son.

Recently I had been reading others' stories of how their sexuality is part of their spirituality. I wondered what my story would look like. I felt inspired and guided by God to tell my story in this way.

I have come to believe that sexuality is on a continuum, with one being exclusive heterosexual and 10 being exclusively homosexual. Bisexuality is a whole fluid identity in between. Bisexual people are not gays in the closet. They are not confused, irresponsible or unable to commit.

As an adult I've come to understand that I am more than just my body. I am soul and spirit as well. Because sexual identity and spirituality are intimately connected, my relationships with women and men are about spiritual growth that includes emotion and intellect. The freedom I have recently found is better than anything I ever expected. As a child I talked with my friend about one day being free. I have been blessed way beyond my wildest dreams.

**Ardelle lives with her 1½-year-old son in Abbotsford, BC, where other members of her family also live. She is focusing on parenting skills.**



**"My prayer was that the deliberations of the faith community would lead us to experience God's healing and hope through unity."**

**"In order to bring the necessary balance and perspective to the discernment process when emotions run high it becomes essential to use a consultant from outside the emotional arena."**

by Donella Clemens

## **The dilemma of a leader: When personal convictions and those of the group are in tension**

*In 1985, a gay couple joined Germantown Mennonite Church. For 13 years the Germantown congregation and the Franconia Conference discussed church membership and homosexuality in many settings with various degrees of intensity. In the days leading up to the Spring 1997 Conference Assembly fatigue and tension grew. But the expectation for an end to the impasse between the conference and the congregation was not met at that meeting and so the conference called for a special mail ballot. In October 1997, delegates from 52 congregations in the Franconia Conference of the Mennonite Church voted 178-40 to terminate Germantown Mennonite Church's membership in the Franconia Conference of the Mennonite Church and to revoke the credentials of Germantown's pastor. At the meeting in which Franconia Conference moderator, Donella Clemens, and conference pastor, James Lapp, announced the results of the vote to the congregation, a gay member of the congregation asked Donella to walk him from the meetinghouse as an embodied symbol of the conference's decision to terminate Germantown's membership in the Mennonite Church. —ed*

To give leadership to a group in times of disagreement is always difficult. Giving leadership to a group discerning issues of sexuality, and homosexuality in particular, is incredibly difficult.

Emotions run rampant and cloud rational thought. But the use of logic causes groups and individuals to spiral in mental circles, chasing jots and tittles. Hence usual patterns of decision-making are rendered ineffective.

When I first considered the invitation to be moderator of Franconia Conference, I committed myself to pray for divine guidance. My prayer was that the deliberations of

the faith community would lead us to experience God's healing and hope through unity. I believed then, and believe more strongly now, that God wants those who seek to follow Christ to walk together in our spiritual pilgrimage, especially when we disagree.

I believe the role of a leader is to give prayerful guidance to a carefully planned process. Under the guidance of God's Spirit the group and its leaders are enabled to determine the decision that is best for that group at that time.

In order to bring the necessary balance and perspective to the discernment process when emotions run high it becomes essential to use a consultant from outside the emotional arena. Persons in leadership can be most effective if they focus their energy on managing the anxiety of the group by leading a process that has integrity. Key elements in such a process are praying with and for each other and providing settings for listening respectfully to all voices. A high integrity process is basic to our understandings of true Anabaptist community.

My style of leadership calls for decision-making to come out of the interaction of the group, in this case conference and congregation. Church leaders are empowered to set in motion the dynamics that will lead to decisions that benefit the spiritual health of the body of Christ. For congregation or conference leaders to take a strong stand with one side adds to the polarity within the group. It essentially eliminates the possibility of giving effective leadership to the entire group.

There is a place for the prophetic voice of a leader in the discernment process. That place is in the earlier rather than later part of the discernment process when that voice is one of many considered and tested by the group. Prophetic voices heard only near decision-making time are often suspect; they appear to be attempting to influence the outcome.

A process is a dynamic interaction of imperfect people in an ever-changing set of circumstances. No process is ever perfect, nor can it be exactly duplicated with effectiveness in another situation. The process Franconia Conference used was tested broadly within the community before it was implemented; it had integrity in our setting for this



time. A consultant, from outside the Franconia community but inside the Mennonite Church community, was essential in helping us find our way through the high tension of those months.

Many persons looking on from the community did not understand the specifics of the process. Those who have intimately experienced the pain involved with homosexuality had few words of advice but many had tears to share with us. It seemed the more words offered in advice, the less genuine understanding accompanied those words.

This has been the most difficult leadership experience I have had in the church or community. The pressures that came to me from all sides were enormous. It was like the pressure of a constant, steady wind, with frequent strong gusts, blowing at right angles, with the tenacious purpose of blowing me off course. There was intense pressure from within the conference for me as a leader to make the decision for the group and declare what the outcome should be. Knowing, however, that the responsibility for the outcome had to remain with the people, I continued to work at defining the process to enable the group to reach its own collective conclusion.

At times it seemed impossible to find a safe, supported place where I could live and breathe. In the midst of that storm it was enormously difficult to keep my personal convictions. My crying out to God often times had the

"This has been the most difficult leadership experience I have had in the church or community. It was like the pressure of a constant, steady wind, with frequent strong gusts, blowing at right angles, with the tenacious purpose of blowing me off course."

ring of hollow words accompanied by empty, anguishing tears. I could not find the presence of God in God's people on many occasions.

The act of personally carrying the announcement of the vote to the Germantown congregation by James Lapp and me was an attempt to deliver the message in as compassionate a manner as possible while giving some integrity to the voice of the delegate vote. In several conversations with the leaders of the congregation, we had clearly stated that we had no personal desire to separate the congregation from the conference. In fact, we prayed that would not happen. I felt used and violated by both the congregation and the conference when I was asked to escort a member of the Germantown congregation out the door. At that moment it seemed there was no space between the congregation and the conference for my personal stand. The wounds of that experience are raw and jagged; by God's grace they will eventually heal but the scars will remain.

The desolate days and sleepless nights following the announcement still haunt me. There were times when the little glimmers of spiritual hope I held on to were nearly snuffed out. That hope was kept alive in the bleakest hours by two wonderful friends, one who offered to come to be with me and the other whose care and support was constant in interpreting for me the dynamics I was experiencing as a leader. The next days three persons, and then more joined those who kept hope alive. In the months since, I have learned from many of their prayers for me and other Franconia Conference leaders during those dismal days. I am humbled and truly grateful for their care and intercession to God on my behalf and on behalf of Germantown congregation and Franconia conference.

Walking on the trails of a local park provided release and solace in these past months. Those hours of crying, screaming, lamenting, and walking in silence with God have gradually developed into a daily routine of meditation and fellowship with God. What began as a mechanism to relieve stress has turned into a joyful excursion bringing new life and restoration to my spirit. Listening to

**"At that moment it seemed there was no space between the congregation and the conference for my personal stand. The wounds of that experience are raw and jagged; by God's grace they will eventually heal but the scars will remain."**

music has also been a great source of healing; music touches my soul at its depths. The music of the masters and the word of David in the Psalms have provided avenues of prayer for my thoughts and emotions.

God, in love and mercy toward all of us, will raise new life out of the ashes of this experience. The pain and discomfort of the Franconia-Germantown experience has resulted in some people in our faith community being more reflective and less reactive on difficult issues. Others are now relating with greater compassion to persons living with the difficult issues of homosexuality.

Yes, my personal convictions are in tension with the decision I was required to communicate to Germantown. I wish we could have continued on our journey together even in our disagreements. But I believe strongly that God does work through the discerning interaction of the faith community. And I believe that as followers of Jesus Christ, we are on a journey seeking God's best will for the people of God. We can ask forgiveness for the pain we cause each other; we can receive forgiveness for sin that we confess to God.

I look forward to the time when we all will have greater wisdom and clearer sight of what it means to be church, to be a faithful people of God together.

**Donella lives in Souderton, Pa. She has been a member of Souderton Mennonite Church since her marriage to R. Wayne Clemens 32 years ago. She and Wayne are parents of three adult children. She has been a full time volunteer in her church and community since the birth of their oldest child. She has a degree in social work. For refreshment Donella enjoys travel, singing, visiting with friends and walking by the water or in the woods.**

#### **Women in ministry**

**Elizabeth Musselman** was licensed as associate pastor of pastoral care at Zion Mennonite Church, Souderton, Pa.

**Julie Bender** is co-pastor with husband Philip at Hamilton (Ontario) Mennonite Church. She also works as Hamilton field worker for the Community Reintegration Project of MCC Ontario. This program provides circles of accountability and support for released sex offenders.

## **Policy on Homosexuality MCC Expanded Policy Manual**

### **I. Introduction**

Generally MCC constituent denominations would understand a practicing gay lifestyle not to be within the will of God.

### **II. Provisions**

Since MCC is the work of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ conferences and congregations, we try to reflect the position they take as sensitively as we can. We do not however have an official position on the involvement of homosexuals in MCC. Since we believe that all singles or unmarried people should live a celibate life regardless of their sexual orientation, sexual celibacy is expected of workers outside of a heterosexual marriage relationship. We are prepared however on a case-by-case basis to consider for placement a person of homosexual orientation who is not actively practicing that lifestyle.

## **Letters**

I've had a goodly number of smiles/laughs over the past week about the use of my name in your periodical. Allow me to make two corrections concerning the use of my name under the heading Women in Ministry.

While it is true that I began an interim pastorate at the Beldor Mennonite Church, Elkton, Va., last November, as stated in your magazine, it so happens that I am a man and not a woman. Apparently the name Addona was assumed to be the name of a woman. It's not the first time this has happened in my life.

Secondly, the name should be spelled Addona, and not Adonna. This mistake has also happened many times in years past.

**Sincerely in Christ,  
Addona Nissley**

The Chair in Mennonite Studies, the University of Winnipeg, will host an international conference entitled, "Engendering the Past: Women and Men in Mennonite History" October 16 and 17, 1998. The conference will explore and analyze ways in which gender has influenced Mennonite history. Author Katie Funk Wiebe will be the keynote speaker at a banquet Saturday night. For more information contact Jennifer Robalsky 204-339-0959,

jediger1@callisto.uwinnipeg.ca, or Royden Lowewn, The University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Ave., Winnipeg, Manitoba, R3B 2E9.

**Maria's Century—A family Saga** by Hilda J. Born is the engaging story of Maria Martens, born in 1900, and her family and communities. Hilda Born shares this story of faithful perseverance through war, revolution, migration and adversity. The book is available from Imprint Press Publishers, Abbotsford, BC V2S 7X8.

## Resources

Aarons, Leroy: *Prayers for Bobby: A Mother's Coming to Terms with the Suicide of Her Gay Son*. San Francisco: Harper, 1995.

Barnett, Walter. *Homosexuality and the Bible: An Interpretation*. (pamphlet #226) Pendle Hill Publications, Wallingford, PA 19086.

Bess, Howard. *Pastor, I'm Gay*. Palmer, Alaska: Palmer Publishing Company, 1995. Easily read book and very powerful.

Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian & Gay Concerns and Supportive Congregations Network, PO Box 6300, Minneapolis, MN 55406, (612) 722-6906.

*Claiming the Promise*. Reconciling Congregation Program (United Methodist). A Bible study curriculum on homosexuality. Provides resources for a seven session adult study. Study books and leader's guides are available from Supportive Congregations Network, SCNetwork@aol.com.

Cole, Beverly. *Cleaning Closets: A Mother's Story*. St. Louis Mo.:Chalice Press, 1995.

Comiskey, Andrew J. *Pursuing Sexual Wholeness, Guide for Group or Individual Use*. Lake Mary, Florida: Creation House, 1989. As a leader in the Christian ex-gay movement, Comiskey presents an excellent discussion of homosexual issues and how to equip people to minister to people dealing with homosexuality.

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Hays, Richard B. *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996. This writer provides a helpful balance of grace and truth in his discussion of homosexuality. His discussion of Romans 1 is particularly insightful.

Kreider, Roberta Showalter, ed. *From Wounded Hearts: Faith stories of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered People and Those who Love Them*. Gaithersburg, Md., Chi Rho Press: 1998?.

Marcus, Eric: *Is It a Choice? Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions About Gays and Lesbians*. San Francisco: Harper, 1993.

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Payne, Leanne. *The Healing of the Homosexual*. Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1984. Explains how the healing of memories and listening prayer make it possible to obtain Christ's forgiveness and to be released once and for all from the bondage of homosexuality.

Scanzoni, Letha and Virginia Ramey Mollenkott. *Is the Homosexual My Neighbor? A Positive Christian Response*. San Francisco: Harper, 1994.

Schmidt, Thomas E. *Straight and Narrow? Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1995. An excellent book about compassion and clarity in the continuing homosexuality debate. Written with both an evangelical Christian perspective and with profound empathy.*

Soards, Marion L. *Scripture and Homosexuality*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995. A brief, well-written book which advocates a heightened sense of both biblical authority and Christian compassion. An excellent discussion of how the church and should respond to issues of homosexuality.

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WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

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## **Constituency church statements on sexuality**

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